Introduction

Now that you understand the various aspects of television as a business, production procedures, television style, narrative, genre, elements of rhetoric and cultural studies, representation, and postmodernism, you are ready to do an in-depth analysis of a television program or an episode from a series. Whether you select fiction or nonfiction programming is entirely up to you. Select a program that you can record and will not mind viewing several times because you will need to examine several aspects of it. Select a program that you want to question or one with which you are familiar. As stated in Chapter 1, it is perfectly acceptable to analyze a favorite program or one that suits your interests and tastes. Your goals are to understand the various elements of a television program, to analyze it, to interpret possible meanings, to judge the quality of the program, and to communicate your assessment in writing.

This chapter brings together the elements of the previous chapters into eight sections: (1) critical orientation; (2) story and genre; (3) organization; (4) demographics; (5) context; (6) the look of the program and its codes; (7) analysis; and (8) judgment. Each category includes questions that you can ask about a television program. Depending on what you want to know about the program, you can select a few or all of the categories. Not all the questions will be relevant to the program you have selected, so you can
choose the questions that are most pertinent. The questions are necessarily
general, thus you can tailor them to fit the elements of the program you have
chosen and the intent of your criticism.

To use the eight categories of questions in this chapter, the television critic
needs to be familiar with the contents of the previous eight chapters of this
book. I have used the ideas, theories, and methods of the previous chapters
to develop questions for analysis and criticism. Rather than repeat unneces-
sarily, I have assumed that you have read the previous chapters and have
participated in the exercises at the end of each chapter.

You will not want to use all the questions in this chapter nor do you need
to. I hope that you will pick and choose the questions that will be most use-
ful to you as you conduct your analysis. The more you watch the program
you have selected to critique, the more you will see.

Critical Orientation

After you have selected the television program you want to analyze, ask ini-
tially what you want to know about it. Assess how you react to it and make
a list of those reactions, for example, laughter, fright, shock, anger, empa-
thy, relaxation, boredom, tension, curiosity, and so on. If it is an episodic
program, try to be aware of other episodes. You can check the program’s
Web site for episode summaries, the names of the characters, the cast, the
characters’ back stories, the production staff, and possibly blogs by the writ-
ers, which may give you some insight into the motivation behind the script.
The easiest way to locate television programs’ Web sites is to use a search
engine such as Google or Yahoo. If it is a series or specialty programming,
you can check the Nielsen ratings on the Web. Also, you can purchase or
check out books about the program from the library, bookstore, or online
booksellers. Check to see if the book is unauthorized or is the official com-
panion to the show. Unauthorized books may not be accurate although they
may contain useful information. In the authorized books, you are likely to
find interviews with the creators, the writers, the producers, the cast, and
the consultants. You also may find episode summaries with names of guest
actors, writers of particular episodes, and directors. Books such as CSI:
Crime Scene Investigation Companion (2004) and Behind the Scenes at ER
(1995) include glossaries of scientific terms used in the programs. This Thing
of Ours: Investigating The Sopranos (2002) includes 10 pages of intertextual
references from the first two seasons of The Sopranos. Sources such as these
can save you time in searching for background details.
Here are some questions to ask for critical orientation.

1. What attracted you to this program?
2. Do you identify with any of the characters?
3. Does the program have a personality or an actor whom you enjoy watching?
4. Are there relationships in the program that you find intriguing?
5. What interests you about the story or the contents of the program?
6. Is the program novel in some way, especially in comparison to other television programs?
7. Is this a program that you are willing to take seriously and spend a lot of time with?
8. Do you talk to your friends about the program?

Story and Genre

Now that you have selected a program to analyze, watch it in its entirety and identify its genre. A very important question to ask at this stage is “How is the story told?” For most television narratives, there is deferred gratification and viewer anticipation. The critic asks how these factors occur.

For example, the television series Monk on USA Network could be considered a hybrid genre, for although it is mostly about solving crime, it also has some comedy in it. As a crime show, it features San Francisco police officers and a special detective named Adrian Monk. It is 60 minutes in length and has an ensemble cast. It features a new crime and its solution each week. As a comedy, it sometimes provokes laughter in a workplace setting. The comedy comes mainly from the character of Monk, expertly played by Emmy award–winning Tony Shalhoub, who suffers from the obsessive-compulsive disorder brought on by the murder of his wife. Monk is afraid of germs, crowds, and disorder. He is constantly putting things back in order, in straight lines. Although obsessive-compulsive disorder is a very serious condition, the comedy comes about because Monk constantly gets himself into situations that put him in crowds, get him dirty, and create disorder. The ensemble cast includes a detective named Randy who is always saying and doing dumb things. There is also an upbeat, jazzy song (It’s a Jungle Out There) with the opening credits that suggests lightheartedness. The show, however, centers on Monk’s uncanny ability to solve a crime. He is perceptive, very intelligent, and determined to track down the criminals. Thus, as an
audience, we can expect to see how the clues come together to solve a crime, but we can also expect to be exposed to humor.

As a narrative, Monk follows the disequilibrium (lack)/equilibrium or enigma, delay, and resolution formula in linear fashion in four acts. In the episode “Mr. Monk Can’t See,” a fireman is killed in the fire station where Monk has brought 30 fire alarms to be tested, which is symptomatic of his obsessive-compulsiveness, for he uses all of them in just five rooms. The other firemen have gone to a five-alarm fire, thus the hero Monk is alone with the killer (the villain) who throws a chemical solution in his eyes and escapes. The lack is that Monk cannot see and consequently becomes very depressed. The enigma is twofold: Will the killer be caught? and Will Monk regain his eyesight? The delay is Monk’s reluctance to work. To keep him active, the police captain, Leland Stottlemeyer, persuades Monk to help solve the crime. At the fire station, Monk touches the coat rack and discovers that there are five coats—but there were six when he was there earlier. His obsessive-compulsiveness reveals the first clue: the killer stole a fireman’s coat so he could go back to the burning house to retrieve something he left there that would identify him. This leads the detectives to connect the five-alarm fire that killed a young woman to the murder of the fireman. In a filthy alley where the coat was thrown in a dumpster, Monk discovers that if he cannot see dirt, he is not afraid of it, and he is elated. This helps him regain his confidence and eventually solve the crime, creating a resolution. However, Monk realizes that the fireman’s killer was also hired by another villain, Peter Breen, to kill the woman in the fire—thus another enigma is created with a delay while Monk tries to connect Breen to the killer. He does so and regains his sight in time to shoot Breen who has gone after him with a knife. The murders are solved; Monk’s lack is removed; equilibrium is restored. The epilogue depicts a relaxed Monk reading a book in his living room. He looks at the picture of his departed wife and smiles, thus there is closure until the next episode.

As a hero, Monk has superior abilities that he uses to complete his task. Others cannot solve the crime without his help. His obsessive-compulsive disorder gives him insight into things that the other detectives do not have. Because he obsessively counts things, he discovers the missing coat. As an injured hero, he cannot see, but resourcefully uses his intelligence and perceptiveness to track down the villains. Although blinded, Monk is not a mythical prophet like the Greek Tiresias who prophesized the future; Monk is, however, modeled after the archetypal hero who faces obstruction (blindness) but overcomes it to complete a task.
Here are some questions that the critic can ask about the story and genre.

1. What are the conventions that make up the genre?

2. If the program appears to be a hybrid genre, what are the conventions of the genres that have been combined to make it a hybrid?

3. What are audience expectations of that particular genre?

4. What is the narrative progression? Describe the events.

5. How is time presented? Are the events successive? Do they go back and forth in time, or do events occur simultaneously?

6. What is the lack or disequilibrium, and how is the lack removed to restore equilibrium?

7. Is there a hero or heroine and a villain or villainy? How is the hero or villain represented? What are their actions, and how can their personalities be derived from their actions? Does the hero or villain have superior abilities?

8. How does conflict play out? Are there oppositions such as good and evil, legal and illegal, work and home, and/or masculine and feminine?

9. Is there closure or delay until the next episode? How is this presented?

10. Identify the stages of the hermeneutic code—enigma, delay, and resolution—that move the narrative forward. (The enigma engages viewer interest by presenting a riddle such as “who committed the crime?” and teases the viewer to guess what happens next. The delay stalls or postpones the solution to the enigma. A resolution to the enigma is finally found, but it may create another enigma.) Can you identify the enigma, delay, and resolution or several of them in the narrative?

11. Are there elements of older stories that are retold in the narrative?

12. Can you identify myths? Do the myths give lessons for social order?

13. Are there archetypes and rituals in the narrative? If so, how do they relate to the myths?

Organization

Examine the parts of the program—the lead-in, the acts, the scenes, and the ending.
Opening Segment

An example from ER illustrates what you can look for in the opening. After five rapid-paced scenes from previous episodes, the lead-in consisted of two different events that created tension: the first was in Dr. Luka Kovac’s apartment where he and nurse Sam Taggert talked about a separation; the second is at the L-train station where two twenty-something women in fashionable suits and high-heeled shoes did not acknowledge Dr. Abby Lockhart’s request to hold the door for her as she rushed to get on the train. She managed to squeeze in the door as it was closing and sat with Dr. Neela Rasgotra, while the other two women whispered and stared at Abby and Neela who were dressed casually in jeans and flat, homely shoes. Abby confronted the two women about their whispering, whereupon one said with giggles and sarcasm, “Your shoes look comfortable.” When they got off of the train, one of the women in high heels twisted her ankle and sat on a bench. Neela went to help her, telling her that her ankle might have been broken, but the woman snobbishly said, “I want a second opinion.” Abby turned around and said, “I’m Dr. Lockhart and my opinion is that your ankle is broken, and you are a bitch!” whereupon Abby and Neela walked away. The mood in these two events shifted from the sadness that Luka felt to an angry confrontation between two different types of women. Abby and Neela were established as unconcerned about their appearance, while the two fashionable women were established as superficial. Despite their snobbish treatment of Neela and Abby, Neela tried to help the woman with the injury, while Abby was acerbic in her dismissal of the woman. Both these events created tension that would be heightened in the acts to follow and created the question, “What happens next?” Following the lead-in, the signature music and credits were presented. The familiar percussion beats and electronic musical notes that signify ER were heard while “ER” appeared in two different-sized fonts, “ER” and “ER.” Then in very quick succession, the eight leading actors were pictured in muted shades of gray in the context of emergency room cases with their names at the bottom of the frame as each one was shown aiding a patient. Finally, a large “er” in lowercase letters was shown in the middle of the screen as the music faded. The mood that was evoked by the credits included rushing, urgency, and stress. The mood of the characters that was established by the lead-in was that Luka was sad and Abby and Neela were angry because they were regarded as “others” by the fashionably dressed women. The viewer knows, however, that these women are truly the “others” because they are superficial.
Here are some questions to ask about the opening of the program.

1. Does the program have a collage of scenes from former shows at the beginning? (“Previously on . . .”) If so, do they create a sense of tension and curiosity about what will happen next?

2. What happens in the lead-in, the beginning of the narrative that sets the scene? How does it entice the viewer to stay with the program?

3. Look and listen to the opening credits. What mood does the music create? Are there other sounds? Are the characters introduced to you in some context? Are the titles symbolic in their appearance, color, or placement?

4. What mood is evoked by the lead-in and by the credits?

The Structure of the Program

After the opening sequence, look at the structure of the show. If it is a 30-minute show, there should be two acts; if it is a 60-minute show, there should be four acts. Examine the acts and scenes for their structure. If there are commercials, note how the scenes before and after the commercials accommodate them. Here are some questions to ask about structure.

1. How do the scenes build on one another?

2. Does the show have a beginning, a middle, and an end?

3. Are there connectives between the scenes and between the acts?

4. If there are commercial breaks, how does the scene before the commercial end? How does the scene after the commercial begin? What gives the scenes continuity?

5. When the show comes to an end, is there closure or is the plot left open until next time?

6. What happens during the closing credits?

7. How are the previews for the next show presented? Are they immediately after the end of the program or after the commercials?

Demographics

Demographics—the description of groups of people according to gender, age, race, ethnicity, occupation, income, educational level, and shared
values—identify target audiences for television programs, sponsors, and advertisers. There are different ways to determine the demographics for a television program. The story line and the ways in which the contents and characters are incorporated into the program should offer strong hints about the potential audience. The day and time that the program is scheduled reveal general information about the intended audience. Information found on the Internet and in books about the program may include demographics. If there are commercials, the intended audience can be interpreted from them. Product placement within the narrative provides clues about the audience as well. Some of the questions you can ask to interpret demographics follow.

1. Whom does the program “hail”? In order to be a subject of the program, what is the expected social position of the audience?
2. To what demographic group is the subject of the program likely to appeal?
3. Are the characters and the actors who portray them young adults, children, middle-aged, or seniors? Are the characters supposed to be single, members of families, lower, middle, or upper class?
4. What are their domestic arrangements? Are the domestic arrangements traditional or nontraditional? What are their domestic surroundings like?
5. If there is product placement embedded in the program, what do the products tell you about the intended audience?
6. If there are commercials between the acts and scenes, at whom are the advertisements aimed?
7. Are the advertised products low, average, or high priced?
8. Are the advertised products for young or older adults, children, or pets?
9. Are the advertisements aimed at singles or couples, male or female, parents or grandparents?
10. Are food advertisements for home cooking, fast foods, or restaurants?
11. To what age groups are medical advertisements targeted?
12. Do the commercials specify certain interests or hobbies?
13. What lifestyles do the advertisements suggest?

**Context**

Context refers to what is happening in the world. Context embraces the concept of “ripped from the headlines,” television stories that reflect actual events. Events can be serious such as threats of terrorism to places and
people or they can be more lighthearted as in situation comedies. An episode of the situation comedy *The King of Queens*, which aired one week before the 2006 Academy Awards show, included two contextual references. The lead character Doug’s buddy Spence had enough frequent flyer miles for two trips and tried to talk Doug into going with him on an archeological dig. Doug said he did not want to go. When Spence asked him where they could go, Doug replied, “Not *Brokeback Mountain*,” mentioning the name of a highly regarded film nominated for several Academy Awards. Because the film is about the love affair of two men, Doug’s remark suggested his reluctance to go on a trip with a male friend. The main plot of the show dealt with an infestation of bedbugs in Doug’s house, which had been brought in by an uncle who previously had gone to a resort. Not long before the show aired, there had been warnings in newspapers and news magazines about people carrying bedbugs from hotels into their homes. Thus, you can expect the plots of situation comedies also to be “ripped from the headlines.”

Context also includes cultural values, social issues, trends, and fads. Intertextuality means that the television program contains references to other events, real or imagined, fiction or nonfiction. Here are some questions to ask about context.

1. How do the characters and events in the program reflect real people and events?
2. What societal and cultural values are represented in the television images and discourse?
3. Does the program reinforce or challenge mainstream societal and cultural values?
4. Are contextual and social issues clearly referenced or are they embedded in the plot?
5. What ordinary personal issues and attributes are recognizable?
6. Can viewers recognize their own fallibility in the characters in the program?
7. What evidence of fads and trends can be detected in the images and discourse?
8. Are there intertextual references to real events and people?
9. Is it possible to specify an attributed intent or a message to the program?
10. What do you think is the expected reaction from the audience?

The Look of the Program and Its Codes

How a program looks contributes to its believability and to the emotions that are conveyed, thus it has to do with the sets, the casting of characters,
costumes, makeup, dialogue, physical movement, music, and sound effects. The look of a program is accomplished by camera work, lighting, editing, and direction. Here are some questions to ask about the look of a program and the reality and representation codes.

1. Are the events located in an indoor studio dressed to look like a home, an office, a hospital, coffee shop, bar, restaurant, or another place? Do events take place outdoors in a city, suburb, or rural area?

2. If you are looking at an indoor set, what makes it look realistic and natural? What objects, furniture, and other articles contribute to the look?

3. Are the colors bright or subdued? How do the colors contribute to the overall look of the set? Do the colors create mood?

4. How do the objects, furniture, and other articles reflect the characters in the set?

5. Are the objects, furniture, and other articles consistent with the time period of the program?

6. What elements provide an authentic look to outdoor scenes? Is there ambient sound?

7. Is there symbolism in the outdoor scenes?

8. Do the actors who were cast for the parts seem right for the characters they play? What personal and physical attributes of the actors contribute to the personalities of their characters on the program?

9. Do the characters have depth or just a few characteristics? Are there repetitive characteristics that reinforce a character’s personality? Are any of the characters social types (easily recognizable people such as hippies, hillbillies, yuppies, Southern belles, gangsters, cowboys, maids, and so on)?

10. Do the costumes the actors wear seem realistic? How do the costumes reflect the characters’ personalities?

11. Is the makeup natural? Does the makeup convey something about the character?

12. How do the physical actions of the characters reveal their personalities and/or motives?

13. Do the actors express their feelings through facial expressions? Can you observe what the character is feeling but not saying in the subtexts of facial expressions and physical movements? Does sound reinforce the subtext?

14. Does the dialogue sound realistic? What is included and what is left out in the dialogue that could engage the viewer to fill in information or speculation?
15. Is there music in the program other than in the opening credits? If so, what do you think is its intended purpose?

16. If there are sound effects, do they complement the dialogue and action? Can you attach meaning to the sound effects?

17. How does the camera work—the shots (close, medium, or long), movement, and angles—convey the characters’ emotions, reactions, and personality characteristics?

18. When there are different shot lengths, how do they move the narrative forward?

19. Do you see “elbows” shots? How do they enhance the story or character?

20. How are reaction shots used to play off characters against one another? Does the silent reaction of a character reveal a subtext?

21. How do the camera work and editing convey continuity or discontinuity in the narrative?

22. Is the lighting bright or dark? What effect does the lighting have on the mood of the program?

23. Are certain actors given special lighting? How can you tell this?

24. If you were the director, would you change any of the shots, lighting, or sound?

25. If you classify the program as postmodern, how would you justify this? In other words, what are the characteristics of the program that make it postmodern?

26. Does the program have a signature look? If so, describe it.

27. How do the producers of the program get the viewer to believe that what is seen is really there?

Analysis

To analyze means to take something apart; synthesis means to put it back together. As a television critic, you are taking a television program apart in order to understand and evaluate it. Your insights are developed from your knowledge of the critical process. Your interpretation will have given you a deeper understanding of a television program, and your readers will benefit from your work by seeing a television program in a different way. How you approach your analysis of the television program depends upon the questions that you ask of it. Because a television program is made for an
audience, questions of analysis focus on audience involvement in the program and how that is accomplished. You will not want to use all the questions for analysis that follow, but they are listed here for your selection.

1. How are ideas developed in the program? How are the ideas adjusted to people and people to ideas?

2. Can you hear laughter from the studio audience? If so, is it likely to provoke laughter from the viewer? Is there any evidence of “canned” laughter from a laugh track?

3. What personal, cultural, and national values are inherent in the program or in certain characters and issues? How are the values communicated?

4. Are there moral lessons? How are they developed? Is the concept of telos—a life of moral excellence—evident in the program?

5. Are evidence and reasoning used to support a conclusion? Does the program ask the viewer to participate in the co-creation of reasoning?

6. What emotional appeals are present? How are they conveyed?

7. What shared substances can you detect that may lead the audience to identify with the program’s characters, ideas, and lessons?

8. What are the qualities of the characters or real people such as news anchors, game show hosts, and participants on reality shows that are likely to create positive identification for audience members?

9. Can you attribute an intention to the program? If so, is it to persuade or inform?

10. How do you think the program may influence certain types of viewers? Does the program have the capability to influence attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors? Could it influence fashion, hairstyles, or body image?

11. How does the program relate to the shared conditions of its time—the culture?

12. Who or what has power or domination over others in the program? Whose voice is heard and whose is not? Who asks questions and who supplies the answers? What issues are given importance and which ones are not?

13. Is there an ideology that assigns roles to certain people or that advocates a set of norms for all to follow? Is there hegemony, where the subordinates are led to consent to the system that subordinates them? Have the subordinates “consented” to accept the social system as natural? Have the subordinates reversed the power structure causing the subordinates to become powerful and the dominant ones to become weak?
14. What is present and what is absent? How is the viewer limited in ways of seeing?

15. Could the viewer place oneself inside the image, identifying with it? If so, what does the viewer get out of the image through the identification?

16. How does the program position the viewer as a subject? How does the program “hail” the viewer?

17. What meanings are preferred by the program? In other words, what are the dominant meanings? What meanings (polysemy) can different viewers make from the program? What meanings can be derived from resisting the dominant meaning? What meanings can be derived from negotiating with the dominant meaning?

18. How might the decoded meanings give the viewer a sense of power or pleasure? How is this related to the viewer’s sense of identity?

19. How could the program help the viewer as subject make sense of social experience?

20. Does the program have the potential to be absorbed into the lives of the viewers? Might they take on new meanings, new identities, and/or new knowledge?

21. As a television critic examining the polysemous meanings, do you discover anything about yourself?

22. Does the representation of characters, places, and events seem natural? Is it possible for the viewer to recognize these characters, places, and events through the representations?

23. How are people represented in categories of gender, race, ethnicity, age, occupation, and physical capabilities?

24. Who is represented and who is not? Is anyone represented as the “other”? Is anyone classified with a loss of individual differences? Are there stereotypes?

25. If there are symbols, how can they be recognized and how do they function? What is the frame of reference for symbolization?

26. Does identification of intertextuality heighten the pleasure derived from the program?

**Judgment**

While recognizing the limitations of the medium of television, the time allotted, and the business constraints of the television industry, you are ready to
evaluate what has been created and how it is presented. Incorporate your
answers to the questions you chose to ask in making your judgment. Your
judgment is an original contribution and, as such, your conclusions should
be substantiated with clear analysis and description. Your evaluation of the
program should be based on critical standards such as these:

1. A television program should accomplish what it sets out to do and do it well.
2. A television program should provide entertainment or information.
3. A television program should be well written, engage and respect its audience,
   and allow for audience involvement and identification.
4. A television program should be professionally produced in such a way that
   the audience can accept what it sees and hears.
5. You can design your own criteria developed from your questions for analysis.

Writing Television Criticism

To communicate your evaluation in writing, you will have the following six
topic areas in your paper, (1) an introduction with a thesis sentence, a state-
ment of the purpose of your critique, and material that orients the reader to
your topic; (2) a description of the television show and a summary of the
narrative; (3) production information about the show’s creators, cast, and
popularity; (4) a description of your critical approach to the program and
the questions you chose to ask; (5) your interpretation of the categories you
have chosen with examples from the program that describe and clarify what
you found; and (6) your overall evaluation and your contribution to under-
standing the program. Topic 5, your interpretation, will constitute the bulk
of your written evaluation.

When you write television criticism, use the vocabulary of criticism; for
example, when you discuss narrative, use specialized terms such as “enigma,”
“delay,” and “resolution,” and when you talk about allusions to other media,
use the term “intertextuality.” It is not sufficient, however, to merely use the
vocabulary, for you must explain what it means and how it is presented in the
television program.

Always proofread your writing, and use a dictionary and thesaurus for
accuracy and variety. Write to your readers; that is, keep in mind that you
have an audience. Remember that your goal is to offer insights to the reader
in order to help him or her see television in a new way.
Summary

With guidelines, television criticism can be rewarding and fun to do. Although you are using specific questions for analysis, your work is subjective criticism, dependent on your ability to closely examine the elements of a television program. If you want to check your own objectivity, you can try the same approach on a different program or episode to measure how reliable your interpretations are. It is also possible to work with a coauthor to get different perceptions and points of view.

If at all possible, try to get tickets to a television show in production. It does not matter whether it is a local or national studio; either way, it will enhance your understanding of the creative process to visit a studio and watch either a run-through or a filming of a program.

As a television critic, you will have gained insights that are educational and useful to you. These insights will change the way you watch television, making it more enjoyable. If you plan to produce television, you will have a greater awareness of what television is and what it can accomplish. Overall, you will have become a more discerning consumer of television.